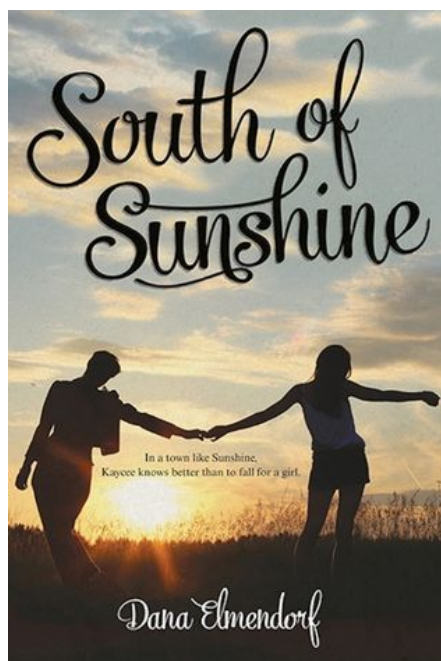




## South of Sunshine

*Dana Elmendorf*

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# South of Sunshine

*Dana Elmendorf*

## **South of Sunshine** Dana Elmendorf

What is Kaycee willing to risk for the sake of love?

And what will she risk for acceptance?

In Sunshine, Tennessee, the main event in town is Friday night football, the biggest party of the year is held in a field filled with pickup trucks, and church attendance is mandatory. For Kaycee Jean McCoy, life in Sunshine means dating guys she has no interest in, saying only “yes, ma’am” when the local bigots gossip at her mom’s cosmetics salon, and avoiding certain girls at all costs. Girls like Bren Dawson.

Unlike Kaycee, Bren doesn’t really conceal who she is. But as the cool, worldly new girl, nobody at school seems to give her any trouble. Maybe there’s no harm if Kaycee gets closer to her too, as long as she can keep that part of her life a secret, especially from her family and her best friend. But the more serious things get with Bren, the harder it is to hide from everyone else. Kaycee knows Sunshine has a darker side for people like her, and she’s risking everything for the chance to truly be herself.

## **South of Sunshine Details**

Date : Published April 1st 2016 by Albert Whitman

ISBN : 9780807575680

Author : Dana Elmendorf

Format : Hardcover 256 pages

Genre : Young Adult, Lgbt, Romance, Contemporary

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## From Reader Review South of Sunshine for online ebook

### Dana Elmendorf says

SOUTH OF SUNSHINE made the list!

Pride.com: "10 Lesbian YA novels you'll totally love!"

Teen.com: "13 YA Books Amazing Lesbian Lead Character..."

Barnes and Noble: 15 of Our Most Anticipated LGBTQ YAs of 2016

PRAISE FOR SOUTH OF SUNSHINE:

"A compelling portrait of a small-town teen learning that she doesn't have to choose between loving her roots and loving who she really is."—Booklist

"The tumultuous coming out and secret romance with Bren will resonate with readers, as will the effects on the teen's friendships. The setting is fully realized, establishing a familiar backdrop for the realistic and unsettling bigotry of the town."—School Library Journal

Check out these wonderful author blurbs for SOUTH OF SUNSHINE:

"Dana Elmendorf is a rich, new voice in contemporary fiction. This touching love story takes an earnest look at the courage it takes to love who you love. Adorable, y'all."—Robin Mellom, author of *Ditched: A Love Story*

"Equal parts sweet and sassy, *South of Sunshine* explores the struggles and triumphs of self-discovery and first love with a heap of Southern charm."—Jessica Love, co-author of *Push Girl*

So um, yeah...I give my book five stars. Does any author not? Or maybe I wasn't supposed to star it? Oh heck, what do I care. I'm proud of my work, as every author should be. I have a special love for this book. I hope you do too. :)

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### Marie says

So this was casually racist and biphobic all the while trying to get across the message that it's ok to be gay and ALSO try to shove your semi-closeted gay friend out of the closet in a dangerously conservative town that LITERALLY STILL PRACTICES SEGREGATION.

A very generous two stars. That was fucking painful.

fuck that it's one stars fuck this book

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### Lo says

HORRIBLE

(warnings for homophobia/suicide)

So apparently i have to scream this again but: STOP calling gay people cowards!!!!!!! stop having them call themselves cowards!!!!!!! stop having them call each other cowards!!!!!!! why are you doing this?????

PLEASE IF YOU'RE A YA AUTHOR THINK OF THE LGBT+ TEENAGERS (OR EVEN ADULTS FOR THAT MATTER) READING THIS!!!! YOU'RE MAKING THEM FEEL WORSE!!!!

Anyway, this was worse than everything previously read somehow. The warning signs were all there in the first chapters but i chose to let it go because i thought it was still gonna be a cute lesbian romance (because i never learn!!!! or something. but i will now) and anyway it was fine for the first half of the book. still annoying but at least they were kissing and i had hope that it was gonna stay at least a little cute.

ok let me you put this all in context: this girl who's gay has been trying to hide it her whole life because as it happens she lives in a town where everyone is disgusting and they hate you if you're not white and straight and rich. so i mean, this is great. why choose this as a setting for a girl/girl romance i sure would like to understand. anyway she meets this girl who's hot so she likes her and as it turns out the girl likes her back and after a few weeks of pretending nothing is happening they start dating secretly! so far so good. her best friend still makes weird comments about this like "when we grow up we'll be leaving in two farms next to each other with our beautiful husbands" okkkkkkkkkk girl.

after all this you can tell inevitably it's all going to hell (when doesn't it???) and when it does you literally get it all

- "am i going to burn in hell? does god hate me" the girl asks after the priest says gay people aren't going into the kingdom of heaven or whatever. cool !
- the inevitable Straight Best Friend Catches Not-Straight Best Friend Making Out With Her Girlfriend : horror ensues
- straight best friend says : "how could you do this to me?" because it's all about you !!!!!
- gay best friend says she will never do it again ! in front of her girlfriend !!!! ok !!!! WHY
- luckily this happened during the weekend so she can have a saturday night out! with her other best friend, who magically happens to be a gay guy !
- and what do we have here ? the classic, timeless Homophobic Insults At A Bar where this piece of shit guy basically tell them they're disgusting and they're all going to hell or whatever shit. and while the level of Necessary Homophobia Experienced By Characters varies from book to book, there's always this random person telling you you're disgusting. IN EVERY BOOK!!!! thanks for that!!!! especially makes feel your readers feel good too, in case they weren't already disgusted by this point. and even if they weren't, they're going to be, because! it gets worse!
- monday: WE ALL GO BACK TO SCHOOL
- straight best friend and her straight boyfriend then basically out her to everyone at school because her life isn't shit enough already
- people talk about her in the toilets while she's listening "we don't need lesbians shoved down our throats at homecoming" CALM THE FUCK DOWN, STRAIGHTY
- her gay friend blames her for crying alone in the toilets on this super shit day of all her life.
- ??????????????????????????????
- "at least i'm not hiding" he says
- because, yes, gay people blame each other for not coming out ALL THE TIME!!!!!!! we in fact do have coming out competitions, winner gets Homophobic Insults On A Daily Basis Because Everyone Is Trash and loser gets called a coward!!!! NICE.
- after which the girls runs away from school and disappears the rest of a day
- Everyone Assumes The Worst
- straight best friend : "i thought you'd killed yourself because you're gay"
- me: akz^dùs;^pful:sd^fkdf^q;lsdùpfdgpo^qsl^pkp^sql^gkf^sdl^fdlsk^
- they're all home with her mother not speaking a word to her and people church being brought over
- You're Gonna Go To Gay Camp

- of course!!!! at this point i'm just guessing the author was like "if you're all in, go all in" i mean yes. the threat of going to camp to become ungay is always such a pleasure to read
- "you'll get fixed and everything will get back to normal" (straight best friend)
- and because it never ends
- she stumbles on a nice conversation:
- "We'll run all the gays out of town"
- GREAT.

This all happens at like 80% of the book of course so you can already tell you're in for Everything's Gonna Get Fixed Magically !

It does !

- The Mother : i thought they were gonna kill you because you're gay so i didn't want you to be. but i still love you..... even though you're gay..... Look What A Great Straight I Am (the girl buys this of course)
- Straight Best Friend : I can't believe you thought i was homophobic (the girl has been talking homophobic nonsense literally since the book started) !! I'm Actually Very Open To Gay People I Was Just Scared That You Would Hit On Me And That It Would Ruin Our Friendship (LEGIT) (the girl also buys this !!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! unbelievable.)
- despite all these nice words tho they both still expect her to go to the camp LMAO. nice acceptance you've got there
- but then it even gets better! all the Accepting Straights decide to fight back against the town !!!!! they basically have a gay parade! !!! some beautifully Supportive Straights even paint RAINBOWS on their front doors!!!!!!!!!! wow !!!!!!!!!!!!!!! i mean honestly. and the girl is happy because people she loves accept her. her straight best friend even breaks up with her straight boyfriend !!!! imagine that!!!!
- then her girlfriend who was missing the whole time comes back and they get back together in 5 seconds and then everyone is happy
- ?????????????????????????????????????????
- Straight Person Writes A Same-Sex Romance : You'll Get Basically Everyone Possible Offensive And Homophobic Shit Thrown At You But You'll Be Happy!

I don't know what else to say but I'm really tired of this (in case that wasn't clear lmao). I don't want go all "we deserve better!" but we deserve better! You might feel proud of yourself because you made them happy instead of them being Tragic And Dead but at this point one might wonder what's actually the better alternative.

Don't read this book.

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## Christina (A Reader of Fictions) says

Pages read: 9

This is a book where the quotes can really speak for themselves. All of this happened during the first chapter, which was only 9 pages long.

I'm being dumped for Chelsea Hannigan— tiny tank top Chesty Hannigan.

Cool. Some casual girl hate, because girls with big breasts are the worst amirite? (No, MC, you are not

right.)

If we're talking, say, Becky Staggs— who has kissed every guy this side of the Mississippi—then my liplocking would be a drop in the bucket.

Here's where she levels up to overt slut-shaming. All while talking about how many boys she's kissed but obviously none of this would come back on her, because she's the MC.

“You're such an eavesdrop whore.”

This is how she talks to her best friend.

Where plaid shirts, jean overalls, and muddy waders were our wardrobe of choice. That is, until one kiss from a cute farm boy at eleven— after that it was dresses and pink for Sarabeth.

This is how she thinks about her best friend. On Wednesdays, straight girls where pink. Lesbians wear shorts. Duh.

“Oh, so she can wear your hoochiemomma hot pink pumps and sink her heels into the cow pasture?”

Just in case we didn't know that it was slutty to where hot pink high heels, it is.

“I hear she's like an Amazon,” says one of the plaid cows.

“A Brazilian Amazon, if you like them slightly browned.

So yeah, I think you can see why I don't want to touch this book anymore.

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## **Jodi Meadows says**

If you've ever wondered where are all the coming out stories about girls -- here's a good one!

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## **charlotte says**

\*\*\*SPOILERS - YOU HAVE BEEN WARNED\*\*\*

**will I ever not be angry about this book?**

*How do you expect anyone to accept you if you can't accept yourself?*

**Galley provided by publisher.**

**Rep:** lesbian mcs, gay side character, female bi side character

You know how, when you're watching a crap TV show, one of those ones that's horrifyingly bad - so bad you just want to cover your eyes and ears and stop watching, but it's compellingly horrifying. It's like a train wreck or a car crash, you're fixated on how badly everything is going wrong. That's me with this book.

I had high hopes. The synopsis reminded me a lot of *The Miseducation of Cameron Post* which is one of my all time favourites. Unfortunately, that didn't hold up.

Within the first few pages I had issues with this book. The majority of the characters were racist as hell, which I know is to show that they're backwards types and bigots, but that the main character hardly called them out on it was probably the first sign that I might not enjoy this book. Honestly, that was enough to have me almost (almost) DNF-ing this one. But I don't like DNF-ing books - I only do it when I really *really* can't stand it - so I continued reading.

And then I got to the slutshaming and biphobia.

There is one character in the book called Chelsea, who's nickname is "Chesty" because, guess what, she has big boobs and she uses them when she's flirting with people (which is apparently a lot). And this makes her a "slut" (a word that is even used to describe her at one point. I can't believe that in 2016 I am reading a book where the word "slut" is used. I thought we were passed this, but apparently not). She even gets this memorable quote:

*It's ridiculous how she just throws herself on Bren.*

And to top it all off, this is the bisexual character. Because *clearly* bisexuals are always flirting with everyone in sight and "throwing" themselves at people. I call biphobia.

(Also around this point, was the scene where one character gets the other to say "I'm gay and I'm proud" in order to get themselves comfortable with being gay. Because saying those words is a surefire way to get rid of all that internalised homophobia and self-hatred that comes from living in a town of homophobic, racist bigots.)

Then there was a great scene where the main character goes around her room, labelling things as marking whether they make her seem girly or boyish. Funny, I didn't realise inanimate objects were gendered. I mean, *Plum purple duvet. Girl. Blue walls. Boy.* What on earth?

At this point, I have to admit, I got tired and started skim reading so I could just reach the damn end already.

There was a point where the main character said about the girlfriend, *heck, I might even be in love with her.* You've known her for a month, maybe two, and you think you're in love. Instalove much? (I cannot stand instalove. It is one of my biggest gripes about YA, the number of times you have instalove instead of proper development of a relationship.)

Next there's this wonderful scene where, after she's screwed up her relationship with the girlfriend because, when they got caught making out (cliche much?), she bluffed it and said it didn't mean anything and she doesn't care, she takes it out on her best friend, who convinced her to roll with all this in the first place (the same one with the "I'm gay and I'm proud" catchphrase). And this is where I had a pretty major rant on Twitter, not gonna lie. Basically, he tells her to be proud about her gayness and own it, and she accuses him

of not doing the same.

The problem I had was that that's not true. He might not be as out and proud as she kind of expects, but he never hides his gayness - unlike her with her dating boys (a bit hypocritical, don't you think) - he dates boys, and he doesn't go around shrugging off being found kissing another guy as not caring about the person (ha ha, it was all a joke, right guys?). And you can't fault him for some self-preservation when he's growing up in a bigoted and homophobic town (seriously, one of the characters comments about running all the gay people out of town to make it safe for their kids. What, did you think he'd go around advertising his sexuality?). He is out to them, but out in a way that he can deny and so be safe (which. Ya know. Ideal.) and that makes sense in this situation, but she's chewing him out for it and I got annoyed.

Then she goes and outs him to the school. And in doing so, says he can be the "next gay target". That is not cool. I get that she's angry, but doesn't she even think that maybe this isn't a good idea? Apparently not, because later on she comments *It wouldn't do any good to out her [the bi character]. She would keep hiding like a coward.* First off, if you're calling hiding your sexuality in a homophobic town cowardice, then aren't you no better off than this character? And secondly, you obviously haven't learned from your outing of your (ex, at this point) best friend. She has no qualms about outing this girl she hates, but she happily confesses to being wrong about outing her best friend, and apologises easily (though if I were her best friend I would not have forgiven her so quickly, if at all).

There's also a part where she's sad because she's lost all her friends. Well, who's fault is that? One, you drove away because you kept a huge secret from her. Two, you drove away when you *outed* him. Three, you drove away when you claimed that it meant nothing when you kissed her and you just brushed it off. Sorry, but you'll find no sympathy here.

My final point is back with the non-white characters (which there are three of who get names, and I guess more who don't but anyway). Right at the beginning, they get a cursory description (which seemed solely to the purpose of showing that these aren't gross stereotypes of non-white characters, but didn't do much more) and they showed up once (to show how gross and racist some of the kids were), and then they disappeared until the end. At which point, lo and behold, they show up for the sole purpose of supporting the LGBT+ characters in their quest for... being able to steal the float so they can paint it as a rainbow and turn the parade into a miniature Pride.

I'm starting to think I should have just DNF-ed when I had the chance.

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## Sarah says

(Source: I received a digital copy of this book for free on a read-to-review basis. Thanks to Albert Whitman & Company and NetGalley.)

***“What I want is for Bren to press her lips against mine. To see if kissing her is different than kissing the boys I’ve been with.”***

This was an okay story, but the pace was a little slow for me.

Kaycee was an okay character, and it was regretful the way she felt she had to hide who she was because the people of her town didn't agree with people being gay.

The storyline in this was about the romance between Kaycee and Bren, and the way the rest of the town turned against them once they realised that there was more than just friendship between them. It kind-of annoyed me how homophobic the town was, and it didn't seem fair the way Kaycee and Bren were targeted. There was some romance in this, but it did take a while to happen, and the slow pace made the book drag a bit for me.

The ending to this was fairly happy, and I was pleased that Kaycee and Bren found themselves in a not-quite-so-difficult situation.

6 out of 10

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### **Pippa says**

Kaycee Jean McCoy is over dating boys, but knows it is the best way of hiding in plain sight in Sunshine, Tennessee. Her best friend, Van, is gay and everyone knows it, but so long as no one mentions it, everyone can pretend otherwise. Her other best friend, Sarabeth, has been happily dating one of the star footballers for the last two years. There is a tight group of friends in a town where the biggest events are listed on the church calendar.

Bren Dawson, the new girl in the school, is exotic, smart, tall, and on a basketball scholarship. Most of the school is enamoured of Bren, none more so than Kaycee. In a town that is largely run by the church, falling in love with a female classmate is the worst thing she can do.

This is a coming of age tale, well written by Elmendorf. The fluctuating emotions and heightened feelings of Kaycee's first love, and fear of losing her mum, her friends, and her future are all well described. There is more than a hint of the believable on the pages, and I suspect this will be avidly read and reread by teens struggling to come out in fear-ridden towns.

Realistic about the difficulties of homophobia in parts, there is a fundamental seam of hope running through the book that provides a breath of air in what could have been claustrophobic and oppressive. I really liked the characters, and the way the story gave room for Kaycee to grow into her strengths, and accept love and support from some surprising characters. This is a well-written blend of some of the difficulties and the joys of being LGBTIQ in a small town.

Early edition provided by Netgalley for review.

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### **Miranda says**

Yeah, never mind. Rampant slut-shaming and another fashion obsessed, sassy gay man side character. And you can tell this is written by a straight woman.

Reading other reviews tells me it only gets worse, so nah, I'm out.

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## Robin Reul says

Five words: This book is so freakin' good. Dana Elmendorf has completely nailed the voice of her MC Kaycee and through it transports the reader into her small town, narrow-minded world filled with intolerance and unacceptance. Rich characterization, fantastic dialogue, and a realistic slow burn romance will have readers turning the pages. It's a novel about owning who you are, and it delivers.

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## Ylenia says

*\*ARC / review copy provided by NetGalley in exchange for an honest review, thanks again\**

I'm caffeinated and ready to rant.

I had the best expectations for this, I was ready to love **South of Sunshine** but unfortunately it didn't happen. This book had a lot of problems; it's not important that it's diverse, that we rarely read about lesbian couples in YA... *if it's bad it's bad*, and I have to be honest about it.

So, here we are in Sunshine, Tennessee, a really small town. And Kaycee is trying to fit in. It's hard trying to be yourself when everything you see around is closed-minded people and bigotry. Then, one day, a new girl arrives in town and Kaycee is taken by surprise because she's falling for her, and this is really difficult to explain to, *you know*, everyone.

So, let's start with *the list*.

⇒ **Slut Shaming** : one of the first things I noticed.

A book that's supposed to promote love for everyone shouldn't fall in these stupid errors.

And it's something that it's accepted and done by the main character too.

⇒ **Biphobia** : multiple times the characters expressed the idea that being bisexual is not really a positive thing, because *bisexual = someone who flirts with everyone*.

The only character that was defined bisexual (meaning the main character thought she was bisexual and simply didn't have the bravery to come out) is also someone that was slut-shamed for pretty much the entire book.

It also felt like they only (kind of) acknowledged the first four letters in LGBTQIA+ and didn't mention anything else about the queer community.

⇒ **Insta Love** : you can write a super diverse and original book but I will get super annoyed if there's insta love in it, I just can't handle. It completely ruined the entire relationship in this case.

⇒ **Coming Out** : I already stated in another recent review (here) that authors tend to use a similar scheme for these types of stories.

Someone finds out about the MC secret and tells the entire school, the MC feels like the social outcast and is *apparently* left without a single friend. I feel like I've read every single variation of this trope by now and I'm kind of tired of it.

⇒ **Main Character** : she was an emotional wreck, it was kind of disturbing to look at it to be honest.

She had the wrong attitude about pretty much the whole coming out situation and when someone confronted her about that, she messed up even more and then offered pathetic excuses.

⇒ **Writing Style** : for the entire time I was reading this book, I was annoyed.

? How many references to being from the South you have to put before the reader understands this book is set in the South? Many 3, maybe 5. Not 154. Not for the entire book.

? The dialogues were so UNREALISTIC they were hurting my eyes and brain. No one talks like that in real life! NO ONE!!!

We're not in a tv series. This isn't a movie! This is supposed to portray a real life situation.

⇒ **Slow Pacing** : the first part of this book was extremely slow paced, and it's not always a good thing to start a book so slowly.

Honestly, I could have DNF this and be done at 50%.

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## Lindsay says

Kaycee is a high school senior living in rural Tennessee. She's also a lesbian, but so deep in the closet that she can't even say the word out loud, and she's been dating boys as a cover. Then a new girl shows up at school and Kaycee is consumed by her attraction to her.

I wasn't going to write a review of this one. For one, I'm ancient, heterosexual and male and I have no experience with either the US or this part of it in particular. To have comments on these subjects kind of goes beyond privilege to expressing opinion from a position of ignorance. However, being ancient and male, it is in the long-standing tradition of my people that I proceed. Let the mansplaining commence.

So why am I writing this? Mainly because some of the higher rated reviews on this book seem to be spectacularly missing the point, in my opinion.

In one case we have a reviewer lamenting that this town is a poor choice of location for a "sweet lesbian romance". As if any town in rural Tennessee would be any different. Statewide, over 80% of people acknowledge as Christian and majority of those as conservative protestants, and in rural areas that percentage would be much higher. So maybe not a great choice of location for the book the reviewer was looking for, but as a location for a book that looks at the very real situation that many LGBTIQ youth are facing still, even after same-sex marriage has been legalized, it's very appropriate. In short, this is a book about being LGBTIQ in a part of the country that is still mostly actively hostile to that. The romance plot takes a back seat to the coming out plot.

In several reviews we see the author and character being criticized because of "slut-shaming". Yes, you shouldn't slut-shame. It's misogynist and wrong, and it sends all the wrong messages to both young women and men. It's also *ubiquitous* and the hyper-connectedness of today's teenagers makes these sort of inter-group judgemental behaviors even more prominent. To have a promiscuous female character who isn't being "slut-shamed" to some extent would be idealistic.

However, in the case of the two people that Kaycee is being accused by reviewers of slut-shaming, one is Charlotte, who's an out lesbian who Kaycee doesn't want to be like because both Charlotte and her girlfriend are social outcasts (nothing to do with being "sluts"; everything to do with being lesbian in this town). The

other is Chelsea ("Chesty") who Kaycee is fairly ambivalent about until she hits on Kaycee's crush, and then the claws come out. She's jealous, and the jealousy clearly goes both ways when Chelsea turns on Kaycee once the relationship between Kaycee and Bren is suspected. There's even an accusation of biphobia. Yes, biphobia is a real thing. However, you can dislike a bisexual character for *other* reasons, including that she's hitting on the object of your crush.

And then there's complaints about Kaycee and Van, her gay friend, calling each other cowards. Kaycee is closeted, and Van is flying under the radar. He goes out of town for dates. Both of these positions are hardly "cowardly" positions for where they live and who they live with; they're sensible survival strategies. Kaycee in particular is religious and goes to a Baptist church, complete with the casual anti-gay messages that this comes with. Her mother is also not only religious, but hyper-sensitive about fitting in, which again, is entirely sensible as a small business owner and single mother. Both of these characters might feel cowardly to an extent, but circumstances make being out and proud really dangerous. Calling each other cowards says more about how they feel about their own positions than it reflects the truth about each other.

There's also some commentary about "instalove". It's hardly that. Kaycee has a crush. Bren notices her crush. This happens over weeks.

There's lots more to say about this book. Certainly Kaycee's reaction to her relationship with Bren being exposed is very poor. It's also very real for someone this closeted and conflicted. And the reaction of her mother completely justifies her being closeted and conflicted to that point. The way Kaycee treats both Bren and Van when this happens is also not great, but it's a believable set of emotions. And her world is pretty much ending; it would be unrealistic if she'd been reading off the Miss Manners Guide to How to Treat Your Friends and Family When You've Been Publicly Outed.

There's also the hints that Kaycee's friend Sarabeth, Kaycee's mother and the school librarian all drop to Kaycee. They all seem to suspect that Kaycee is a lesbian and the first two drop hints that she shouldn't "choose" that path, and the librarian feels quietly supportive. Sarabeth's reaction appears mostly to be hurt feelings.

Anyway, I really liked this book. As a story about coming out in an intolerant environment and how those environments are slowly changing, I think it was great and had a mostly hopeful message.

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## **Sarah {Literary Meanderings} says**

- My review of this book can be found on my YouTube channel here: [South of Sunshine by Dana Elmendorf](#)

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## **Tiff says**

Kaycee McCoy is a senior high school student in a small town in rural Tennessee. Kaycee has been kissed by a lot of boys, but it just doesn't do anything but gross her out. She literally was happy to be dumped by her last boyfriend. Everything changes when a new girl shows up on the first day of senior year.

Bren Dawson is tall, athletic and has no problem making new friends at her new school. She hails from

Boston, and has no problem being who she is, an out and proud. Bren brings up all the feelings and desires Kaycee has been repressing for quite a while. She grew up in Sunshine, Tennessee which is definitely not a bastion of equality and understanding. The only thing is a relationship with Bren is too tempting for Kaycee to deny.

This is an emotional coming of age tale. This story takes you through Kaycee's journey of first love, admitting who you are, and the fall out of living in a society that is pressuring you into who you love. South of Sunshine is a well written YA novel. You will find it full of teen aged angst and coming to terms with being gay in a small southern town. It is also a story of friendship, and how those friendships evolve as real issues are brought to the forefront of their lives. I must say I liked this book, and Kaycee is a pretty cool character.

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### **Claire (Book Blog Bird) says**

This was quite a sweet story about a girl finally admitting to herself (and to the fellow residents of her small Tennessee town) that she is gay.

Sadly, in Sunshine, Tennessee, gay isn't an option, so Kaycee tries to fit in by having a boyfriend she detests kissing and not admitting to anyone, least of all herself, that she really likes girls. Then a new girl starts at her school and everything goes kind of right and then pretty wrong.

So I should probably start off by saying that I'm British and as such the only things I see about homophobia and hate crimes in America are filtered through the lens of the media. God knows, we don't exactly live in an ivory tower here in the UK as far as bigotry is concerned, but it sounds like if you live in Sunshine, Tennessee and you're gay then it must be an absolute bloody nightmare! Kaycee and her mother attend this church that basically sounds like the Westboro Baptist Church - all God Hates Fags and hellfire and damnation. Her mother isn't much comfort either - she completely buys into the church's teachings and is terrified that her daughter will show her up. The kids at Kaycee's school seem to take after their parents with their bigoted attitudes, too.

I liked Kaycee and felt genuinely sorry for her and the turmoil she was going through and while there were plenty of times where I wanted her to grow a pair and stand up to her friends and the other townsfolk, I could see why this was difficult. The relationship between her and Bren was very sweet and the difficulties they faced as Kaycee tried to accept who she was but also hide from everyone else were pretty heartbreaking.

There were points where I thought the pacing slowed down quite a lot. We got a lot of internal monologue, which I get is important because of all the stuff Kaycee is going through, but I wanted there to be some action in there as well. I thought that there needed to be more tension in the plot. There were lots of opportunities for tension - the threat of sending Kaycee to gay conversion therapy, the conflict between her faith and her sexuality - and I think they needed to be explored more.

The ending was very sweet and I was glad Kaycee got an HEA, but it did seem like many of the previously-bigoted townsfolk and students changed their views pretty darn quick at the end (although I did love the finale with the float - it sounded awesome).

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